

American History

"Rebuilding the Nation"

Before the Civil War, rich planters controlled southern politics. During Reconstruction, however, new groups dominated state governments. They tried to reshape the politics of the South. The old leaders had lost much of their influence – and three groups stepped in to take their place: 1) white southerners who supported Republicans, 2) northerners who moved to the South after the war, and 3) freedmen.

- 1) Some white southerners supported the new Republican governments. Many whites felt that any southerner who helped the Republicans was a traitor. White southern Republicans came to be called sacalwags.
- 2) Northerners who moved south after the war were also an important force. These people came to be called carpetbaggers. There were many reasons why northerners headed to the South after the war over. Some went to get rich as the South was being rebuilt. Many others were Union soldiers who had grown to love the South's rich land. Others, including African Americans, were reformers who wanted to help the freedmen.
- 3) Freedmen were the third major group in Southern politics during Reconstruction. Not only were voting in large numbers, but they also ran for and were elected to public office. African Americans became sheriffs, mayors, and legislators in the South's new governments. Between 1869 – 1880, 16 African Americans were elected to Congress.

Southerners who had held power before the Civil War resisted Reconstruction. Nearly all were Democrats. These white southerners, known as Conservatives wanted the South to change as little as possible.

Other white southerners were wealthy planters who wanted to force African Americans back to work on plantations. Others were small farmers and laborers who felt threatened by the millions of freedmen who now competed with them for land and power. These whites declared war!

White southerners formed "secret societies" to help them regain power. The most dangerous of these "secret societies" was the Ku Klux Klan, or KKK. The Klan worked to keep blacks and white Republicans out of public office. Dressed in white robes, to hide their identity, Klansmen rode at night to the homes of African Americans shouting threats and burning wooden crosses. When their threats did not work, the Klan used violence. Ku Klux Klan members murdered hundreds of African Americans and their white "allies".

Despite political problems, Reconstruction governments tried to rebuild the South. Public schools, railroads, telegraph lines, bridges, and roads were some of the ways governments tried to help out.

Cotton production, the basis of the South's economy, recovered slowly. By 1880, planters were growing as much cotton as they had in 1860!

Industry also grew in the South during Reconstruction. Still, the South lagged behind the rest of the nation in industry. By the end of the century, the South was actually producing a smaller part of the nation's manufactured goods than it had in 1860!

Rebuilding the South cost money – Reconstruction governments raised taxes sharply!

In the hard times of Reconstruction, many freedmen and poor whites went to work for large planters. They farmed the planters' land and in return were given a share of the crops at harvest time. These landless farmers were called sharecroppers. For many, sharecropping was another form of slavery!